

A
S E R M O N

Preached before the

King & Queen

A T

W H I T E - H A L L ,

O N

Christmas-Day, 1693.

By the Right Reverend Father in GOD,
E D W A R D Lord Bishop of *Worcester*.

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L O N D O N ,

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ON

CHRISTMAS DAY 1801

By the Hon. Richard Bland

Esq. of the Hon. House of Commons

in the Year 1801

Printed by J. Johnson, St. Paul's Church-Yard

S. JOHN III. 17.

For God sent not his Son into the World to condemn the World; but that the World through him might be saved.

THese words are part of the Gospel written by S. John, wherein he doth not only fill up the History of our Saviour with many Particular Discourses omitted by the other Evangelists, but the Whole seems to be Penned in another Strain and with some different Purpose and Design. It's true, that they all Agree in the same general End of Writing which S. John mentions, viz. *That we might believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God, and that believing we might have life through his Name;* ch. 20. 31. but they make Use of several Methods, as most agreeable to the Circumstances of the Time and Place and Occasion of their Writing. S. Matthew wrote his Gospel for the sake of the Jews; and therefore he begins with the Genealogy of Jesus Christ from Abraham, and shews that the Prophecies were accomplished in him, and how he came not to destroy the Law but to fulfill it, and that his Miracles and Doctrine were sufficient to convince them that

he was the promised *Messias*. S. Mark wrote only a Summary Account of the most material Passages relating to the Person and Doctrine of Christ for the sake of the *Gentiles*. S. Luke takes a larger Compass, and puts things into an exacter order of Time, as himself tells us, and adds many Circumstances relating to the Birth of Christ, and the general Advantage to Mankind by his coming; that he was to be a *Light to lighten the Gentiles, as well as the Glory of his people Israel*. S. John succeeding the rest, found two great things which gave him Occasion of Writing his Gospel;

1. The perverting the Doctrine of Christ by the *Ebionites* and *Cerinthians*, who pretended to give great Honour to Christ as an Excellent Person both for Wisdom and Holiness, but yet so that he was but a *meer Man*, to whom God, upon his Baptism, had given extraordinary Gifts and Assistances of his Holy Spirit.

2. The other was, that the Gospel which was designed for the universal Good of the World met with such cold Reception and Entertainment from it.

ch. i. 11. *He was in the World, and the World was made by him,*
 12. *and the World knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not.*

What could be more uneasy to so true a lover of Christ as S. John was, than that he lived to see his

his Doctrine perverted, and his Design in so great a measure rendered ineffectual? And therefore in the writing of this Gospel,

1. He begins after another manner; and in a very short, significant and lofty style, he sets forth his Eternal Being and Godhead. *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* And as the *Eternal Power and Godhead were understood by the things that were made*, as S. Paul saith, so he adds, *that all things were made by him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.* Rom. 1. 29 ver. 3. Which is as certain an Argument of the Divinity of Christ, as there is of the Being of God from the Creation of the World.

2. As to the other Point; it was indeed a sad and amazing Consideration, that the wonderfull Love of God in sending his Son into the World should have so little Effect upon the Generality of those to whom he was sent and his Doctrine Preached; but the Apostle contents himself with these two Accounts of it;

1. That it was far from being God's Intention or Design in sending his Son to make Mens Condition worse and more desperate; *For God sent not his Son into the World to condemn the World, but that the World through him might be saved.*

2. But

2. But it might be presently objected, That if this were God's Intention, the World would not have receiv'd so little Benefit by it, but according to the Terms of Salvation proposed by the Gospel so few will have advantage by it; therefore the Evangelist adds, that if Men did perish they must thank themselves for it; *For, this is the Condemnation that light is come into the World, and men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil, v. 19.*

So that here are two things which deserve our Consideration.

I. The wonderfull Condescension and gracious Intention of God in sending his Son into the World.

II. The true Reason why so many Miscarry, as to their Salvation notwithstanding; viz. their own Wickedness and Folly.

1. The former of these, is that, which upon this Day we have particular Reason to take Notice of; not in a slight superficial Manner, (as though an Annual Commemoration of it were all that God expected from us,) but our Minds and Souls ought to be possessed with a deep and humble Sense of so great, so undeserved, so astonishing a Condescension of God to Mankind. And the more we think and consider of it, the more amazing and surprizing it must appear to us: For when the *Psalmist* thought but of God's Providence towards Mankind, he

he could not but break out into that Expression,
Lord, what is man, that thou art mindfull of him, and Psal. 8. 4.
the son of man, that thou so regardest him! 144. 3. *What is*
man indeed! a Mass of Vanity and Disorder; weak
 in his Judgment, wilfull in his Passions; uncertain
 in his best Resolutions, violent in his worst Inclina-
 tions; strangely bent upon what tends to his Ruin,
 and hardly brought to understand and pursue his
 truest Interest! What is such a Creature as this,
 that a God infinitely Wise and Powerfull, far above
 our Thoughts as well as our Services, should con-
 cern himself about the low and trifling Affairs of
 Mankind! But such is the Goodness and Conde-
 scension of God, that he humbles himself so far, as
 not only to behold, but to Govern the Things that
 are done upon Earth.

But *what is Man that he should visit him!* Not
 with the meer common Demonstrations of his
 Kindness, which he affords to other Creatures;
 but that when Mankind had so far degenera-
 ted and fallen off from God by their Sins, that
 they deserved to be for ever cast off and forgotten
 by him; that then God should visit him by *sending*
his Son into the World that the World through him might
be saved; this is so far above our Imaginations as
 well as Deserts, that it seems to be the most colour-
 able Pretence for Infidelity, that it is too great a
 thing for Mankind to believe.

But

But I am sensible, that in this Sceptical and Unbelieving Age, there is such a Humour of Cavilling against Matters of Revelation, especially this Fundamental Article of it, that it would seem as if we were afraid to look their Objections in the Face; if we take no Notice of them; and on the other side, to insist too much upon them, were to make them appear much more considerable than they are. Therefore I shall pass over all the Trifling and Impertinent Talk of such Men (which is not whispered in Corners, but I am afraid is become a Matter of too Common and Publick Discourse) and I shall single out that which seems to have the greatest Weight in it; *viz.* Suppose God should have an Intention to offer Terms of Salvation to Mankind, yet what need was there that *the Son of God* should *come into the World* for that End? Had not God easier Methods of doing it than by the *Incarnation and Crucifixion of his Son*? Is it not more Credible, that God should forgive Sins without any Attonement, than that he should *send his Son* to be a Sacrifice of Propitiation to himself? Is it not enough for us to believe all the Principles of Natural Religion to be true; for we own a God, and Providence, and a Life to come, and Rewards and Punishments of Mankind according to the Nature of their Actions; but why should our Faith be

cramp'd

cramp'd by such incredible *Mysteries* as these, concerning the Son of God's coming into the World; in such a manner as the *Evangelists* describe it: This is so far from being a Kindness to the World, that it makes the Condition of Salvation so much harder, if we must believe things which seem so impossible to us, and so hard to be reconciled to the *Natural Principles* of Reason and Religion.

I shall not dispute it with such Men whether these late Pretenders to *Natural Religion* have at the bottom any real kindness for the Principles of it, or not; I am willing to hope the best, and that it is a meer Dissatisfaction in them as to our Revealed Religion; and that this pretended Zeal for *Natural Religion* is little more than a meer Sham and Disguise to avoid a more odious Imputation. But let it be as great and real as they pretend, what I at present undertake, is to make it appear, That none who do embrace the Principles of *Natural Religion* can have any Reason to reject the Christian, even as to this Article of God's sending his Son into the World, which they seem most to stumble at.

I shall not go about to shew, how the Christian Religion not only Supposes, but Improves, Refines, Establishes and Enforces the most noted and allowed Principles of *Natural Religion*, as to the Being of God and Providence; the most Agreeable way

of Worship ; the Nature and Kinds of Moral Duties , the Rewards and Punishments of another World, since no one of common Sense can deny that the Christian Religion is very Exact and Particular in these things above any other Institution in the World.

And therefore I cannot, but in passing, take notice, that I do not remember any one Institution in the World with respect to Religion, except that which we have by Revelation, which hath not some notorious Blunders in it, as to the Principles of Natural Religion and Vertue ; and therefore they have far less Reason to quarrel with Christianity than any other Religion (if their quarrel were not really against all, as I fear it is ;) Let them look abroad over the unchristian World ; and they will find such foolish Notions, such vain Superstitions, such incoherent Fables, such immoral Practices allowed by their several Religions, as would make a considering Man wonder how the Notion of Religion could be so debased among Men. Let them look backward upon the Passages of elder Times, and they shall find either they set up false Gods with the true, or the false Worship of the true God ; or a Worship disagreeable to the Divine Nature by mean Representations, or uncouth Sacrifices, or impure Rites ; or else there were some horrible
Flaws,

Flaws, as to the Common Principles of Morality, as to Conjugal Society, or the Rights of Property, or the due Regard to the Preservation of Mankind; or they give such a pitifull Representation of the Rewards and Punishments of another Life, as if they had a Mind to have them look'd on as Fables, or despis'd as unworthy our regarding them above the present Pleasures of Life. But I dare challenge the most Cavilling Sceptick to find any just Fault with the Duties of Christianity; For the Worship of God required therein, is Pure, Holy, Spiritual, very agreeable to the Divine Nature and the common Reason of Mankind. The Moral Precepts of it are clear, weighty and comprehensive. And those who have delivered them to us, neither commend any Vice, nor sink the Reputation of any Vertue; they never lessen our Duties to God, or to one another; all the just Complaint is, that the Precepts are too strict and severe, too good and too hard for Mankind to practise them. But is this an Objection against our Religion, or against Mankind? If they think that, let our Religion require what it will, the generality of the World will still live and act like Brutes, and go against all Reason and Religion; how can we help it? But we hope the blame is not to be laid on Reason or Religion, that so great a part of Man-

kind are either Fools or Mad-men ; *i. e.* either want Sense to understand their Duty, or are resolved not to Practise it. Especially considering, that the Rewards and Punishments of another Life, are set forth in the Gospel, with that Clearness, that Force, that Authority, that if any thing of that nature would work upon Mankind, these must.

But all these things I pass over, and come to that which I proposed as my chief Design, which is to prove, *That none who truly believe the Principles of Natural Religion, can have any Reason to reject this Fundamental Article of it, as to God's sending his Son into the World.* And that upon two Accounts.

I. That the *Principles of Natural Religion* make this Design appear very Credible, or fit to be believed by Men of Sense and Understanding.

II. That the *Principles* on which this Fundamental Article of our *Revealed Religion* stands, afford sufficient Evidence to prove it True ; and therefore that we are bound to Believe it.

As to the former, the *Grounds or Principles* which I go upon, are these :

I. *That the great End of Christ's coming into the World, viz. the Salvation of Mankind, is most agreeable to the Infinite Wisdom and Goodness of God.* No one who believes a God, can deny him to be of Infinite Wisdom and Goodness ; for the very same Reasons
which

which move Men to believe a God, do convince them that he must be of Infinite Wisdom and Goodness, seeing the strongest Evidences to prove his Being are from the Instances of them in the World.

These being then supposed, as essential and inseparable Attributes of the Divine Nature ; we are to consider what End with Respect to Mankind is most agreeable to these to carry on ; and we must suppose Mankind to be made up of Soul and Body, which are capable of Pleasures and Satisfaction, both in this World and another : But our Souls are of an Immortal Nature, that will subsist in Happiness or Misery after this Life, otherwise the Rewards and Punishments of another World signify nothing ; the Question then is (if it can be made a Question) Whether it be more agreeable to the Infinite Goodness and Wisdom of God to provide for the Well-being of Mankind in such a low and gloomy a Region, as this Earth is, or to advance them into a far better Place, and better Company, and more noble and divine Delights, and those not depending on a fading, drooping, dying Life, but on the perpetual Enjoyment of a complete Happiness both of Soul and Body. No one that ever dares to think or consider of these things, can believe there is any Comparison between them ; so that the Salvation tendred by
the

the Gospel, is the most agreeable End which the Wisdom and Goodness of God could carry on for the Benefit of Mankind.

But why should Mankind flatter themselves with the Hopes or Expectation of a Happiness so far above what they can pretend to deserve?

There were some Grounds for such an Objection as this; if we supposed the Rewards of another Life to come from any other Fountain than the Infinite Goodness of God towards those who sincerely love him and endeavour to please him; although with many Failings and Imperfections. But this is the only *Hypothesis*, which we maintain to be the Christian Doctrine: And what is there in it, which is repugnant to the Wisdom and Goodness of God? What was it but Infinite Goodness which gave a Being to the World at first, and hath preserved it ever since, and made it so usefull and beneficial to Mankind? What is it, but infinite Goodness that suffers us to live and enjoy so many Comforts of Life, after so many great and continual Provocations? If we were to argue from our Deserts, it were impossible for us to justify the wonderfull Patience and Long-suffering of God towards the sinfull Race of Mankind; for we are certain, that they have long since deserved to be cut off from the Face of the Earth? If we consider

sider the Justice and Holiness of God, whereby he is daily provoked to punish Offenders, and the Power he hath to execute his Justice in a Moment, without any opposite Power to controll or resist him ; we have Reason to be astonished at the Wonderfull Patience and Forbearance of God, of which we every day see so large Experience. But this is not all ; he doth not only suffer them to live, but often makes their Condition easie and prosperous as to this World, having Health, Riches and Honour, and the Hopes of their Posterity, enjoying the same things after them. Now these to such, who do not believe or value another Life, are the greatest things God can do to their Satisfaction. But if they can allow so much Goodness in God towards those who continually offend him ; why should they question greater Instances of it towards those that endeavour to please him ? I do not mean as to this World, but as to another which they value far before it ; for if they do not, they have no reason to expect any Happiness in it : Why then should it be thought more unreasonable for God to bestow the Happiness of another Life, on those who esteem and choose it, than to give the good things of this Life to those who love and admire it ? I do not say, the Wisdom is equal in the Choice ; but the Goodness of God is wonderfull

full in both. And there can be no imaginable Ground to suspect, that God should be really less kind to those who love him best. It is a vain thing to talk of those *being saved by Christ's coming into the World*, who do not heartily love God and keep his Commandments; for the whole Design of the Gospel is to persuade us to one in order to the other; and therefore it is not a well-grounded Hope, but a fond Imagination for any to expect Salvation by Christ on any other Terms. If we then take in the whole *Hypothesis* or true Scheme of Christianity together, it is no other than that *God sent his Son into the World, that the World through him might be saved*; not by continuing in the sinful Practises of this World, which S. John calls *the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eye, and the Pride of Life*; but by subduing and mortifying all disorderly Passions do prepare themselves for a better State. Now, if there be in our Minds a firm Persuasion of the infinite Goodness of God, of which we are convinced by meer Natural Reason; why should it be thought hard to believe, that God should take Care of so great and good an End, as the Eternal Salvation of those who truly love and obey him.

II. The next Principle agreeable to Natural Reason and Religion is, *That no such thing as Salvation or Happiness in a future State can be expected without*

without the particular Favour of God. For, all who do own Natural Religion, must agree that the Soul of Man is an Immortal Thinking Being; and therefore its Happiness must consist in such a sort of Thinking, as carries the greatest Pleasure and Satisfaction along with it. Let us think with our selves what a Soul separate from the Body can do, to make it self Happy: Here it was Intangled, Corrupted, and therefore apt to be deceived by the false Appearances of things, which glide through the Senses and leave too lasting Impressions on the Mind; and thereby it comes to mistake Shews for Substance and meer Colours for Realities. But this is a Mistake so common and so fatal to Mankind, that very few are thoroughly undeceived in this World; for one way or other they are apt to flatter themselves with some Pleasing Mistakes and Delightfull Errors of Life. But as soon as the Soul is dislodged from this cloudy Mansion in the Body, all things will then appear, not as by an uncertain Sky-light in a dark Room, but in an open and distinct View, and then it will be impossible to be any longer deceived by false Representations of Things. What then can be conceived sufficient to entertain and please the Mind? Will it be the Reflection on the past Pleasures of the Body? No certainly; for those cannot bear a severe Reflection

onw; and the very thoughts of them make men's Minds very uneasie; for the most tempting Pleasures of Sin leave no grateful Relish behind them. How then should the Mind bear up it self in another State, when its Reflections must be far more constant and severe? What then? Can the Mind lay it self asleep, and put it self into a State of Unthinking? That were all one, as a kind of self-Annihilation if it be of a Thinking Nature. There is a State of *Unthinking* in this VWorld, which is too common; when the Mind is as it were overlaid and stifled with Feathers; I mean is so taken up with trifling and vain Imaginations, as hardly give way to one serious Thought. But this is impossible in another State; and therefore nothing but what will bear a most strict and severe Scrutiny can give any Support or Comfort to the Mind then. It must be true and real Good to create any Satisfaction; It must be durable and lasting to keep it up; It must be Compleat and Perfect to answer all the just and reasonable Desires of an Immortal Soul. And what can this be less than God himself? And therefore the Christian Religion speaks most agreeably to Natural Reason, when it still supposes the Happiness of another VWorld to consist in the Presence and Enjoyment of God. For those must have all that is desireable, who enjoy the Favour
of

of him who commands all things, and knows how to suit them to the greatest Advantage to those to whom he designs to shew his Favour.

And this Prospect of another State, or of *the Salvation of Mankind by Christ's coming into the World*, is that which lets us into another View of all that relates to the Son of God's coming into the VWorld: For if our Minds be possessed with great Apprehensions of the Power and Greatness of the VWorld; all that the Gospel represents as to the manner of God's sending his Son into the VWorld, his being born of an obscure Virgin, being laid in the common Manger, being bred up in a private Place, having so mean Followers, meeting with so cold a Reception from his own People, and at last, being exposed to an Ignominious Death by them, looks very Reproachfull and Contemptible. But on the other side, if we could raise our Minds to such Idea's of things here, as the Glorious Spirits above have; and see how all things are esteemed by them according to the Ends and Purposes they are designed for, we should then perceive how admirably all these things were fitted for his great End; which was to wean Mens Hearts from the Pomp and Vanities of this VWorld and to prepare them for a better; and we should then have quite another Opinion of these things: For as there is a certain Greatness, which

is above all the formal Shews and affected Appearances of it, so when a Great and Noble Design is to be carried on, the true Measure of *Decorum* in that Case, is that which is most serviceable to the principal End. If a great Person had a Design to rescue some near Relations out of Slavery, he would never go with a splendid Equipage and a long Train of Attendance, which would but make his Person more gazed at and his Design less Effectual. If he had intended to have rescued them by Force out of Captivity, it had been necessary to have had Power and Strength proportionable to his Design; but if it were only by Perswasion, then he must accommodate himself to such Methods as were most likely to prevail.

The great End of the coming of Christ was to deliver the Souls of Men from a much worse Captivity, *viz.* of their own Sinfull Passions and the Devil's Tyranny by their means; but he did not come in a way of Violence to break open the Prison-doors and in an instant to knock off their Fetters and bid them be free; but he makes use of all the gentle and effectual methods of Perswasion, not only by his Words but by his own Example; that they might learn by him to despise this World, who had so little in it, and to prepare for that from whence he came, where their Happiness should be unconceivable and without End.

III. The

III. The Third Principle is, *That no such Particular Favour of God is to be expected, as long as his Displeasure is so just against Mankind for Sin, and no effectual Means used to remove it.* The truth is, the whole Scheme of the Gospel turns upon this Point, whether God be really displeased with Mankind for their Sins, so as to need a Reconciliation: For, if all that the Scripture so often expresses concerning the *Wrath and Displeasure of God* against Mankind for Sin, be only Figurative and Hyperbolical Expressions, then the whole Design of the Gospel must be given up as a meer Scheme; for, if God be not really displeased, there is no need of Reconciliation; if no need of that, then there can be no need of Christ's coming to reconcile us to God; and if he did not come for that End, we have no Reason to believe the Scripture, which affirms it over and over. And I do not think any stronger Argument can be brought to prove a thing, than that the most Emphatical Expressions are so often applied to that purpose, by such Persons who used all Sincerity and Plainness. So that this matter as to the Scripture is clear, if any thing can be made so; and if nothing can, I cannot see how it is possible to have a written Rule of Faith; since all Writings are capable by Ambiguity of Words and Phrases, by the different Use of Particles and Transposition

position of Letters and Syllables, of very different Interpretations.

But this is not my present Business, which is rather to consider the Natural Sense and Reason of Mankind as to this matter. We cannot in Reason suppose any such Passion in an Infinitely Perfect Being, as that which we call *Wrath and Anger* in Men. For that is a violent Perturbation arising from Surprise and Indignation ; but there can be no Disorder or Surprise in a Being of Infinite Wisdom. Therefore *Wrath in God* must suppose two Things.

1. A just Cause of Displeasure given by us.
2. Such a Just Displeasure following upon it as will End in the severe Punishment of Offenders if it be not removed.

Now, whether there be a just Cause of Displeasure or not, must depend upon the Natural Differences of Good and Evil. And it is impossible that any one who exercises his Reason, can judge amiss in this Matter. Not, that all the Differences of Good and Evil are equally clear, for all Propositions in Mathematicks are not so ; but it is sufficient to our Purpose, that the general Principles are so ; and the greater Instances ; so that no Man can think that he Acts as much according to Reason in one as the other. And, can any one of common Sense imagine God to be as well pleased with him

him who blasphemes his Name, and despises his Service, and hates Religion, as with one that Fears and Honours him, and endeavours to Please him? Can he be as well pleased with him, that assassines his Parents, as with him that obeys them? With him that robs and defrauds his Neighbour, as with him that relieves him in his Necessities? With him who subdues his disorderly Passions, as with him that gives way to them? With him who is Cruel, Inhuman and Perfidious, as with him that is Faithfull and Just and Compassionate? These are but some of the Instances of the Differences of Good and Evil, but they are so plain and notorious, that a man must renounce the common Principles of Humanity, who doth not own them. And to say there are no such Differences, because there have been Mistakes and Disputes about some things accounted Good and Evil, is as Absurd, as to say, there is no Difference between Day and Night, because in the Twilight it is hard to distinguish them. But if there be such a real Difference in the Nature of Human Actions, and God be a strict Observer of them, he being a God of Infinite Holiness and Justice, cannot but be offended with Mankind's wilfull Omission of what they know to be Good, and Commission of what they know to be Evil.

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But here we must distinguish between God's Displeasure against the Actions and against the Persons who commit them. The former is a Necessary Consequent upon the Evil of Sin and can never be removed, for God is irreconcilable to Sin. But those who commit Sin are his Creatures; and therefore Capable of Mercy and Forgiveness. There is always a Desert of Punishment following upon Sin; but there is no inseparable Connection between the Sin and the Punishment; for the great and wise Governor of the VWorld acts not by Necessity of Nature in punishing Sinners, but by the Methods of VWisdom and Justice. And if the saving of Sinners upon their Repentance can be made agreeable to these, such is the Mercy and Goodness of God to his Creatures, that there is great Reason to hope for a Reconciliation. For, although God be displeased, he is not implacable; although he be justly provoked to punish Sinners, yet there is no Absolute Necessity that he should; nor any irreversible Decree that he will do it; and therefore notwithstanding this Displeasure of God, there is a way still left open for Reconciliation, which leads to the next.

IV. The Fourth Principle is, *That if God be thus displeased with the Sins of Mankind, and yet there is a Possibility of Reconciliation between God and them,*

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He alone is the most proper and competent Judge, on what Terms this Reconciliation may be obtained. For being both the Offended Party and the Supreme Governor, he hath the sole Right on both Accounts of fixing those Terms and Conditions, upon which he will forgive Sins, and receive the Offenders into Favour. It is a vain thing for any to argue from one Attribute of God against another. Some are apt to flatter themselves that God will easily forgive Sins, because he is Mercifull, but they ought to consider that he is Just and Holy as well as Mercifull; and there is as much ground to fear that he will not forgive because he is Just; as there can be to hope that he will because he is Mercifull. And thus it is impossible for a considering Man to satisfy his own Mind as to God's forgiving his Sins; unless he be some way assured from himself that he will do it. And therefore a particular Revelation in this case must be made, if God designs to bring Men to Repentance by the Hopes of Forgiveness. But meer Repentance can never make any satisfaction to God for the Breach of his Laws. Suppose a Sinner comes to himself and is heartily sorry that he hath Offended God so many ways, and with such aggravating Circumstances as he hath done; and now resolves in the Anguish of his Soul never more to return to the Practice of them; This no

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doubt,

doubt, is far more pleasing to God, than going on to offend still; but all this is no more than a man in justice to God and to himself is bound to doe; for he is bound to vindicate the Honour of God's Laws, and to condemn himself for his own Folly, and to return no more to the Practice of it. But what Amends is made by all this, for the infinite Dishonour which hath been done to God and his Laws by the Violation of them? The Courts of Justice among Men take no Notice of the Malefactors Repentance; however he be affected, the Law must be observed, and Offenders punished. How then can any persons be assured from meer Natural Reason, that God will not be as tender of the Honour and Justice of his Laws, as Mankind are allowed to be without any imputation of Cruelty or Injustice?

If God should be exact in punishing Offenders, who could complain? For who can plead *Not-Guilty* before his Maker? And when a man's own Conscience condemns him that he hath deserved Punishment, what reason can he have from himself not to expect it? And if he doth justly expect to be punished, what reason can he have to hope for Forgiveness? Since he knows that he deserves to be punished, and therefore can never deserve to be Forgiven. It must be therefore a Free Act of
Grace

Grace and Mercy in God to forgive even Penitent Sinners ; and upon what Terms and in what Manner he will do it depends wholly upon his own Good Will. He may forgive Sins if he pleases, and it is agreeable to his Nature to do it, if Sinners do Repent and Forsake their Sins ; but whether God hath actually made known to us the Way of Reconciliation cannot be known by any Principles of Nature ; because it is a matter of Fact and must have such Proof as a thing of that Nature is capable of.

II. Having thus shewed, how strongly the Principles of Natural Religion do make way for entertaining this point of the Christian Doctrine, as to *God's sending his Son into the World* in order to our Reconciliation with him and our Salvation by him ; it remains now to shew how justly God doth require the Belief of it from us as True ; for the next words tell us, *That he that believeth on him is not condemned ; but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God,* v. 18.

This, some may say, is very hard Doctrine ; for they believe as much as they can ; and if they can believe no more it is no fault ; for no man can be bound to believe more than he can. I do not question but *Nicodemus* (to whom these words

are generally supposed to be spoken by our Saviour) thought he had gone a great way, when he used those words to Christ, v. 2. *Rabbi we know that thou art a Teacher come from God, for no man can do these Miracles that thou dost except God be with him.* i. e. He was willing to believe him some great Prophet whom God had sent; and this was a fair step for a Ruler among the Jews, who were generally very unreasonable Unbelievers. But Christ tells him plainly this would not do; for unless he believed him to be *the only begotten Son of God*, he could not be saved. And this is the great Point, *That God so loved the World, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life*, v. 16. Not, as though meer Believing this were sufficient (for this carries a great many other things along with it) but that since God had sent *his only begotten Son* into the World upon such a Message, he did expect that he should be received and entertained as such upon their utmost peril.

But can we believe farther than we have Reason to believe? No; God doth not expect it from us, provided that with sincere and impartial Minds we set our selves to consider and weigh the Evidence and with great Humility beg the Assistance of Divine Grace, without which God may justly leave us to our Unbelief.

It

It would be too large a Subject now to lay open the several Arguments to prove that it is as evident, as a matter of Fact can be made to us, that *God did send his Son that the World through him might be saved*; Therefore I shall only mention these two things.

1. That if the Matters of Fact are true concerning the History of *Christ's Coming*, as related by the Evangelists, there can be no Reason to doubt his being *the Son of God*. For he that was the most Exact Pattern of Humility and Self-denial, not only frequently assumes this Title to himself, and his most intimate Disciples affirm it of him; but God himself gave the most ample and convincing Testimony to it; by his miraculous Birth; and a Voice from Heaven to that purpose at his Baptism; by a long Train and Series of Publick and Usefull Miracles to attest the Truth of his Doctrine; by his Resurrection from the Dead and Ascension into Heaven, and wonderfull Effusion of the H. Ghost, with the strange Effects which followed it; so that no one who doth believe these things to be true can have any ground to say that he cannot believe *Christ to be the Son of God*.

2. That if these Matters of Fact are not to be believed as True we cannot be bound to believe any thing but what we see our selves. For the distance

stance of Time and Place are equal in this Case ; and no other Matters of Fact are so well Attesten as these are. And so, as the Apostle saith of Christ's Resurrection, *If he be not risen our Faith is vain* ; so in this case I say if there be not Reason to believe these things *All Faith is vain*. For no other Matters of Fact, which we should be accounted Fools for not believing, have had such a sort of Testimony which these have had. For these things were not conveyed by a silent Tradition for some time till the Chief Parties were dead who could either Prove or Disprove them ; but they were Publick and Exposed to all manner of Examination ; They were not deliver'd by one or two, who were trusted with a Secret, but openly avowed by a great number of Competent Witnesses, who were present ; and none of them could be brought by the greatest Sufferings to deny, or falsify, or conceal any part of their Evidence ; that when these things had been thus delivered by those who saw them, who were most remarkable for their Innocency and Integrity, in the next Ages they were examined and enquired into by Men of Sagacity and Learning, who upon the strictest Search found no reason to suspect their Testimony ; and therefore heartily embraced and defended the Christian Faith. And from thence they have been conveyed down to us ;
not

not by an uncertain Oral Tradition, which can hardly hold the same from one end of the Town to another; but by unquestionable Writings; of such Authority, that the Christians would rather dye than deliver up their Books. And in these are all those Circumstances contained, which we are bound to believe as Christians; among which this is one of the Chief, *that God sent his Son into the World for the Salvation of Mankind.*

To sum up all; I desire those who after all this pretend that they are willing to believe as much as they can, and those who are liable to any Suggestions of Infidelity, to consider seriously with themselves, whether there can be a greater and more noble Design, more becoming the Wisdom, Power and Goodness of God to carry on, than that of rescuing Mankind out of a miserable State, and putting them into a certain way of Eternal Happiness? Whether such a Design must not be discovered in some particular Age of the World, with all the Circumstances relating to it? Whether that Age were not the fittest of all others, wherein the most remarkable Prophecies were to be accomplished, as to the Coming of the *Messias*, while the second Temple was standing? Whether the Difficulties as to Human Testimonies be not equal to all Ages and Things? Whether because it is possible for all men to deceive,
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it be reasonable to infer that all men are deceived ; and that there is nothing but Illusion and Imposture in the World ; and that all men lye and deceive for the sake of Lying and Deceiving ? But if there be a Difference to be made between Men and between Testimonies ; then we are to examine the different Characters of Truth and Falshood and give our Assent according to them. And if after the severest Examination we do not find sufficient Reason to believe *that God sent his Son into the World for the Salvation of Mankind*, upon such Testimonies as are given of it, we must conclude all Mankind to be made up of Fraud and Imposture ; and that there is no such thing as Sincerity and Honesty in the World ; or that if there be, it is not possible for others to discern it. Which are such fatal Reproaches upon Human Nature, that no one who pretends to any Regard to it can be guilty of. For if they be universally true, they must condemn themselves ; if not, we must see some very particular Reason why we should not rather think them deceived, than fix such an Indelible Blot upon the Reputation of Mankind. And surely it is a great Advantage to the Truth of Religion to find, that it cannot be overthrown but by such Methods, as equally overturn all Truth and Certainty, and that the Faith of Christianity stands not only upon the
same

same Bottom with the common Faith of Mankind. But if we reject such Assurance as is offer'd us for the Faith of the Gospel, our Infidelity cannot be the effect of Reason and Argument, but of a causeless Suspicion and unreasonable Mistrust of the best Part of Mankind. Who have most firmly believed the Truth of these things and have led the most Holy and Exemplary Lives in Hopes of a Blessed Immortality. And if the Testimony of any Persons deserves to be taken before others, it must be of such who could have no Design upon this World but were resolv'd by Faith and Patience to prepare for a Better.

To Conclude. For us who believe and own the Truth of this great and fundamental Article of the Christian Faith, we have something else to do than meerly to Vindicate and Assert it. This at some times is more necessary than at others; and I heartily wish this were none of them. I am willing to hope the best of all who in such an Age of Infidelity have the Courage and Zeal to own the Faith of this Day; viz. *That God sent his Son into the World in order to the making us for ever Happy.* And I hope none who profess themselves Christians this Day will ever be discouraged by the Mocks and Flours of Infidels so as to let go the Anchor of
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their Hope, or mistrust the Foundation of their Faith. It is as great a piece of Wisdom to know when to Believe, as when not to Believe; and it is as certain an Argument of a Weak Mind to be always Doubting, as to be over-forward in Believing: For the Soil must be very bad that can bear no Foundation. But withall let us not flatter our selves only that we have a better Faith than others. For how miserable will our Case be, if we have nothing but a Superficial Faith; and a sort of Anniversary Devotion. We can never thank God too much for the Blessing of this Day; but God expects something more from us, than meerly the giving him Solemn Thanks once a Year for *Sending his Son into the World*. We must endeavour to answer the End of God's sending him, *i. e. to save us first from our Sins, and then from the wrath to come*. This is the Method which God himself hath appointed, not barely from his own Will and Pleasure, but from the necessary Order and Reason of Things. For, otherwise a Man might be Rewarded for doing amiss, and Punished for performing his Duty. If we therefore ever hope for any Benefit by this coming of Christ into the World, we must apply our Minds to consider seriously on what Conditions we may reasonably hope for Salvation by him. Can they think that Christ came

to so little purpose as to save Men in their Sins? If that were to be hoped, there had been no need of his Coming; but it is a hard Work indeed to save us from them. The Guilt must be expiated, and the Power subdued; the former Christ hath done; but he expects, and with great Reason, that we should deny ungodly and worldly Lusts, and work out our own Salvation with Fear and Trembling.

FINIS.

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